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Can Saigon Defend Itself?

Our Central Intelligence Agency finds that even greater than expected fear moves into Vietnam as our troops pull out. And this contains such a potential setback for President Nixon's fundamental U.S. policy that his re-election may well ride upon it.

So-called Phase II is the President's answer to the politically dangerous situation on the home front. His Vietnam policy, in turn, is to hope that South Vietnam can erect a government and military structure strong enough to protect itself against disaster.

Hanoi hopes for the reverse of our hope. The Red leaders there want to postpone any settlement whatever until they have had at least a try at collapsing the Saigon structure we and the South Vietnam government hope to build.

MR. NIXON'S definition of this hope is the war's "Vietnamization." But this may turn out to be only a euphemism. The idea is far from new. The Defense Department confirms to me that we sent the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) about \$702 million in equipment and supplies from 1959 up to the time of our own combat intervention.

Moreover, "Vietnamization" had a major test after our intervention. This was just prior to the 1968 Tet (Lunar New Year) holiday. When the Reds struck in 43 cities more than half the manpower of the ARVN divisions had gone home for the holidays. The ARVN forces, already at only 70 per cent of their Saigon-declared strength, were at less than 50 per cent. The ARVN high command first thought about 15,000 Reds were attacking. It recalculated this to 36,000. Actually, the number was 60,000.

Through that time "Vietnamization" would have spelled total disaster. Nevertheless, the hope of it is President Nixon's basic policy.

Mr. Nixon inherited from President Johnson a force of 538,000 Americans in Vietnam and the immense presence of the 7th Fleet's ships and planes. After the current withdrawal there will be no ships or planes of the U.S. Navy, and the U.S. Army rear guard will consist of only two combat divisions and perhaps only one. A year later the President's declared schedule is to leave only about 30,000 U.S. support -- support -- troops in Vietnam.

THE AGONIZING problem in this large-scale retreat (always the most difficult of all military maneuvers) is how to protect your rear guard.

Do you remember Napoleon's retreat from Moscow? Do you remember how Nazi Field Marshal Erwin Rommel in his North African retreat lost a quarter of a million men in his rear guard?

Executing our pull-out we were threatened by 60,000 North Vietnamese in Cambodia. Our incursion into Cambodia was a spoiling action covering our rear guard in Vietnam. But since then the absolute keystone of the Nixon policy -- "Vietnamization" -- has been put to a test with all that Mr. Nixon has done to supercharge the program.

This test was the ARVN's attack into Laos. And, as a demonstration to support the U.S. hope, it was a disaster. Nor has this been the only test. The ARVN's subsequent reverses so far in this same 1971 year in the Mekong Delta and near the DMZ indicate that a lack of ARVN improvement is the reality.

BEHIND THE SCENES, we are still in the wound-blinding stage from the Laos experiment the Mekong Delta and DMZ reverses, and unrevealed reports to the Pentagon conflict regarding the ARVN's recovery. But a public statement by Col. David H. Hackworth, a combat veteran of five years in Vietnam and the most decorated U.S. officer in the war there, is not reassuring to the keystone of the Nixon policy.

Leaving Vietnam and retiring from the Army, this officer directly involved in the "Vietnamization" frankly stated: "I haven't seen any substantial improvement in the ARVN. After the American withdrawal we'll find ourselves with a situation comparable to 1964. 'Vietnamization' is a word which must be a product of mere dreams."

Under the circumstances of our withdrawal, it is the only dream available. Moreover, everything doubters said about the South Korean defense 15 years ago has again a familiar ring. The South Koreans, nevertheless, have emerged well.

But this "Vietnamization" hope has little or no time left in which to become a reality, and President Nixon's absolute dependence on it more profoundly clouds his future than White House insiders are willing to admit.